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ABSTRACT

Five major reasons for the high incidence of laboratory school closings are indicated prior to a description of survival strategies applied in the Early Learning Center at Pennsylvania's Kutztown State College's Child Development Laboratory School. Causes of laboratory school closure are the following: (1) financial difficulties; (2) retrenchment; (3) enrollment problems; (4) competition for space; and (5) organizational politics. Strategies facilitating program survival include enlisting parental support, raising tuition, maintaining a waiting list, keeping an active profile on campus and a high visibility off campus, developing and field-testing practical educational ideas, publicizing activities, and rendering the lab school's services indispensable. Positive features of the Early Learning Center are listed, as are indications of changes in its conditions. (RH)

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Remaining Afloat: The Survival of a Child Development Laboratory School

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Paper presented at the

National Organization of Child Development

Laboratory Schools Preconference Session

of the National Association for

the Education of Young Children Conference

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RUNNING HEAD: REMAINING AFLOAT

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A story of doom and gloom was communicated in a review of the literature, as nearly half of the laboratory schools in this country reportedly passed out of existence over the last 30 years (King, 1987; VanTil, 1987). "Roy Creek, Director of the Falk School, University of Pittsburg, has noted in a letter sent to all identified laboratory schools, that from 1964 to 1984, college controlled laboratory schools have declined by 58 percent" (Kasnic, 1986, p. 39). Unfortunately, many of the remaining lab schools seem to be in a tenuous position.

Causes for Closure

As this educator began to analyze why various lab schools in Pennsylvania and New York, two state systems with which she was familiar, had been threatened with closure, or actually abolished, there appeared to be five major reasons. Many of these causes were interrelated.

1. Financial

By far, the most common explanation given by administrators was financial. They were pressured by their funding sources to reduce the budget of their department or college. Eliminating a total lab school program was a simple means of trimming a budget quickly, often with little resistence offered by non-lab school faculty members who were grateful that their own positions

and programs were not threatened.

2. Retrenchment

Deans and chairpersons were frequently given a ultimatum by their boards of trustees or state officials that they must retrench staff members. This reason was directly tied to budgetary constraints. An entire lab school staff stood out like a huge sitting duck. Retrenchment of these lab school and faculty members was an easy method of filling the quota for a university, without rocking the boat for other departments. Often, the lab school personnel did not have university faculty status which made them quite readily dispensible.

3. Enrollment

A third problem appeared to be a drop or shift in enrollment by the children and/or college students. Many working parents and students needed full-time day care for their youngsters, rather than a part-time preschool program. Other parents felt that a lab school experience was viable for nursery or kindergarten children; however, they wanted them to enter the public school to be with their peers for the elementary years. Rising tuition costs also forced parents to reconsider sending their children to a lab school.

For a period of time, in the '70s and early 80's, education colleges suffered a decline in the number of students who needed to receive training as pre-service teachers in lab schools. The lower student enrollments meant less tuition collected by the education departments in colleges which led to additional financial problems that eventually threatened the future of lab schools.

4. Space

As education programs were on the wane, other university departments were growing rapidly and in need of space. Business departments, telecommunication centers and computer services soon replaced block corners and children's desks. Playgrounds were turned into parking lots for the hoards of non-traditional, commuting students.

5. Politics

Young children do not have a strong political lobby. Lab school programs have never had the clout of science and technology or business whenever equipment, funds, space or new faculty were needed. During the '70s, there almost seemed to be an epidemic that wiped out lab schools at state-supported colleges. On the local college level, there is still a continual jockeying for positions, funding and space. Without an updated set of long-range goals which appear to be beneficial for the college

community, the lab schools lose ground to the high-tech money producers.

The Kutztown University of PA Early Learning Center

During June 1979, the Kutztown State College (PA) Laboratory School proudly celebrated its 100th birthday with a gigantic party. When a shocked staff returned in the fall, they were informed by the administration that the school would close at the end of the year, as a direct result of a state-wide order to retrench faculty and reduce the budget. The elementary faculty members were eventually offered positions elsewhere in the college, while the two nursery and kindergarten teachers remained on. With greatly reduced facilities, loss of support staff, a quarter-time coordinator assigned also to other duties, and a changed program format, the new Early Learning Center program arose from the ashes as a survivor.

Survival Strategies

Nearly 10 years later, as other departments continue to nibble at the lab school space, the two ELC faculty members have been forced to take on additional duties while suffering the loss of administrative and support staff. However, the open environment ELC program, comprised of 15, full-day kindergarten children and two, half-day

nursery sessions, each with 14 students, has managed to endure by applying the following survival strategies:

1. Enlisting parental support--In 1979, the parents were our most important ally, fighting hard to keep the school open by sharing information with board members and state legislators. They methodically searched for additional funding sources.

2. Raising tuition--It finally became necessary to raise the minimal tuition in order for the board and administration to feel that the school was partially shouldering its financial burden to the university. At the same time, it was imperative to keep the fee low enough, so that families could afford to continue to send their youngsters.

3. Keeping a waiting list--A lengthy waiting list of young recruits, maintained from the day they are born, indicates to the administration a strong community support for the services provided by the lab school.

4. Continuing an active profile on campus--The ELC faculty serve on, and chair, various departmental committees, as well as acting as union representatives. The staff members each volunteer for at least two college-wide committees every year. This educator voluntarily coordinated an early childhood conference

for 625 educators and a bilingual/multicultural conference for preservice teachers.

For daily visibility, when the college asked to turn the playground into a parking lot, the faculty requested a new location near the student center where everyone on campus would notice the program as they walked by. A portion of the budget is spent to make the ELC's developmentally appropriate outdoor environment an attractive "showplace".

5. Maintaining a high visibility off campus --This enhances the laboratory school's on-campus credibility. The staff members inform the dean, department chair and other important campus figures about their involvement to ensure maximum public relations. They offer to share their workshop evaluations and encourage sponsoring organizations to send copies of "appreciation" notes to their administrators.

The faculty members hold office in local professional organizations, such as the county academic alliance steering committee and a church day care center board. Each year, they present sessions which relate to center activities at state early childhood and special education conferences. On the regional level, this educator acts as a member of a six-state kindergarten conference

steering committee. To bring further credit to the university, nationally she serves as the President and Editor for the National Organization of Child Development Laboratory Schools and as a Commissioner for the National Association for the Education of Young Children's National Academy for the Accreditation of Early Childhood Programs.

6. Developing and field-testing practical, educational ideas--The ELC faculty members continue to publish ideas regularly in a wide variety of nationally distributed early childhood publications, such as newsletters, magazines, trade books and teacher's manuals. This educator serves on the editorial advisory board for an early childhood teacher's magazine and she is currently publishing a book for teachers. The staff members feel a strong obligation to share and network with other educators and preschool parents.

7. Publicizing activities--Publicity is a key to remaining afloat. The ELC professors consistently utilize the daily faculty brief, college newspaper, and school of education and graduate newsletters to advertise their participation in the previously mentioned activities. They purposely space the announcements in the faculty brief for maximum effectiveness. When colleagues say,

"I read your name in the brief each week," it is planned that way. This is not because the teachers are egocentric; the very survival of the lab school depends upon its being perceived in a positive, professional light!

At the end of each year, the ELC staff members submit a lengthy annual report to the dean and president. Besides making it apparent to the administration that the lab school and its faculty members are making an impact in the field, this involvement scores points for the program during Middle States and Pennsylvania Department of Education evaluations.

8. Making the lab school's services indispensable--The two lab school faculty members attempt to make the services of the ELC program vital to the needs of the early childhood undergraduate component. They try hard to be cooperative and professional; however, they must admit, there are times that they feel overwhelmed as they attempt to portray a "super school" image. On an on-going basis, the ELC faculty members collaborate with the other early childhood professors to provide demonstration lessons for courses and act as resource consultants to the college students.

As the early childhood concentration recently swelled to 400 undergraduates, the lab school staff

members volunteered to screen the "Introduction to Early Childhood" and "Theories" students during their 10 participation hours at the ELC. Of great importance to the survival of the laboratory school, when the college's early childhood program received its certification, the strong observation/participation component was built into the courses. As the university is located in a small town in a rural area with few early childhood centers, it is difficult for the professors to have their students meet this requirement elsewhere.

What Does the Early Learning Center Have In Its Favor?

1. Strong parent support.
2. Departmental affiliation with the college of education (Nielsen, 1986).
3. The staff members have faculty status and hold academic rank (Nielsen, 1986).
4. The ELC has its own budget (Nielsen, 1986).
5. The faculty members have learned to become politically, aware. Additionally, they hold union membership which offers them another source of support.

Conclusion

At the Kutztown University Early Learning Center, the faculty members continue to successfully host a myriad of observers, help prepare pre-service teachers,

support simple research, teach young children and provide in-service teacher training. Over the past few years, there have been both highs and lows at the ELC. The laboratory school program: gained, then lost, a graduate assistant; lost a quarter-time coordinator's position (presently, the staff members perform his duties without compensation); finally obtained a two-morning-a-week secretary; lost the multipurpose room and an office; gained a new xerox machine; and lost two motors in the heating units! Significantly, the Early Learning Center is still afloat and making a whale of a splash!

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